

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

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A virile language is normally identified by its slang. Considering the simple phrase, "It's a bomb"; a teenager might be referring to a sports car; a drama critic to a dismal play. Police spokesmen, however, are usually less imaginative.



THE BOX I carried was approximately nine by nine by nine, and it was wrapped securely in common brown paper.

young man at a desk at the far end, it was unoccupied.

His eyes flicked uneasily to the box I carried. "May I help you?"



I entered the huge lobby of the city hall and strode rapidly toward the elevators. I noticed several policemen scattered throughout the crowd, several of whom seemed to take more than a passing interest in what I carried—or perhaps it was my beard which attracted their attention. However none of them attempted to intercept me.

The elevator took me to the third floor. In the corridor I walked by several more policemen, one of whom rubbed his jaw and frowned as I passed.

I opened the door to the mayor's reception room. Except for a single

"You may. I would like to see the mayor immediately."

His tongue ran over apparently dry lips. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I would have mentioned it if I did." I glanced at my watch. "It is absolutely imperative that I see him at once."

"Just one moment," he said quickly. He darted through a door behind him and I thought I heard the click of a Yale lock.

There followed approximately four minutes of silence and then the door from the corridor edged open cautiously.

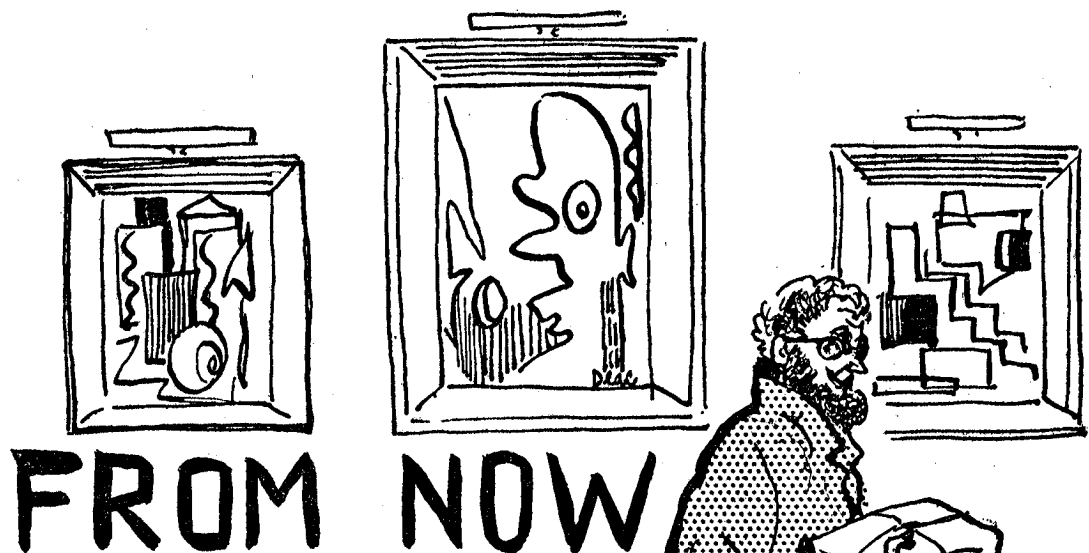
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A tall man in a plain blue suit hesitated in the doorway. Behind him a number of uniformed police officers craned their necks.

He glanced at the box, then at me, and seemed to gauge the situation. Then he motioned the officers

The box almost slipped from my lap, but I managed to retrieve it before it hit the floor. When I looked up, I saw that the lieutenant's eyes were clamped shut and he seemed to be waiting tensely for something to happen.



behind him to retreat. He sidled into the room alone and closed the door. "Did you want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Are *you* Mayor Pettibone?"

"No," he said swiftly. "I'm Lieutenant Wymar." He manufactured a smile. "Why do you want to see the mayor?"

"That is plainly my business."

There was an uneasy silence and then I thought that his ears suddenly flared, radar-like, in reception of a sound. He pointed to the box I held in my hands. "Is that thing *ticking*?"

It was.

By
Jack Ritchie

TEN MINUTES FROM NOW

His eyes finally opened and he exhaled. "What's in that box?"

"That is *also* my business." I consulted my watch again. "I must see the mayor within the next *ten* minutes. Not one second later."

He seemed to brighten a little. "Ten minutes?" He took several steps forward. "The mayor is busy right now. Couldn't you come back later?"

"No." I put the box down on the bench beside me. "If I don't see the mayor immediately, I am tempted to blast my way into his office."

What occurred next was lightning fast. Wymar's hands seized my package and he flung open the corridor door. "Quick! Somebody get a bucket of water! This thing's timed to go off in less than ten minutes."

I followed on his heels. "See here, what's the meaning of this?"

He ignored me. "Damn it, doesn't *anybody* have a bucket of water?"

I glimpsed half a dozen policemen dashing about. One of them wrenched open a door which proved to be a janitor's closet. It contained various cleaning materials and a deep sink. He immediately plugged the sink and opened both faucets wide. "Over here, Lieutenant!"

Wymar thrust the package into the sink and in a few moments it

was completely immersed in water.

I watched the air bubbles rising from the submerged package and sighed. "I *do* hope it's waterproof."

Wymar's eyes widened. "*Waterproof*? I never thought of that." He waved a hand. "Everybody back! The bomb may go off any minute."

I found myself automatically involved in a retreat to the end of the corridor.

"Somebody phone the bomb squad," Wymar ordered.

A very young policeman saluted. "Yes, sir. What's the number?"

Wymar turned purple. However he immediately pointed to a sergeant. "Murphy, get the bomb squad."

The sergeant departed and Lieutenant Wymar's attention returned to me. I was rather forcibly escorted into an empty room down on the second floor.

Two policemen remained to guard me while Wymar departed, presumably to superintend evacuation activities. He returned fifteen minutes later looking considerably relieved. "The bomb boys are here."

And then he removed a sheet of paper from an envelope and thrust it before my eyes. "*You* wrote this, didn't you?"

He would not let me touch the paper, and so I had to squint as I read the typewritten words.

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Mayor Pettibone:

Your actions on the Veterans' Memorial development were arbitrary and clearly not in the public interest. Since there seems to be no legal means of removing you from office immediately, I intend to blow you to kingdom come.

The Avenger

I shook my head. "Elite type. I prefer Pica. Much easier to read."

He scowled. "Did you or did you not write this note?"

"My dear sir, if I intended to blow up the mayor, would I forewarn him?"

"Maybe," Wymar said. "Some bombers are nuts."

I smiled. "Are my fingerprints on the note?"

Evidently there weren't any fingerprints on the note, except possibly the mayor's, because Wymar did not answer the question.

"What's your name?"

"James B. Bellington," I said.

He began writing in a notebook. "James C. Bellington."

I corrected him. "James B. Bellington. As in bomb."

"And your address?"

"I have a room in the Medford Hotel. A miserable place, but it is all I can afford at the present time."

"Did you lose any money when the Veterans' Memorial development was switched from the east

to the north side?" He paused.

I patted a stray hair of my beard. "I refuse to say another word until I've seen my lawyer."

At that moment one of the men who was evidently a member of the bomb squad entered the room. He was encased in pads and he carried my soggy package. He levered up his mesh face mask and spoke. "We checked it out, Lieutenant."

"Well?" Wymar demanded.

The padded gentleman shrugged. "An alarm clock. That's all. Just a cheap alarm clock."

"Of course an alarm clock," I seconded testily. "What did you expect? A bomb?"

Wymar spoke in a slightly strangled voice. "Do you still want to see Mayor Pettibone?"

"Not at the moment. I'm afraid the mood has left me." I smiled slightly. "You *do* protect the mayor very well, don't you? A thing like that is nice to know. Anyone wishing to blow him to bits would have to be very clever about it, wouldn't he?"

Lieutenant Wymar's eyes narrowed slightly as he studied me.

I rose. "Good afternoon, gentlemen."

Wymar remembered something. "Don't forget your alarm clock."

I shrugged. "I'm afraid it is ruined. You may keep it for exhi-

bition in the police museum." I smiled again. "Tell Mayor Pettibone that I shall return. Perhaps this after . . ." I stopped, waved amiably, and departed.

In the lobby downstairs I purchased a five pack of panatellas. I lit one of them and continued out into the street.

At the corner newsstand, I stopped and glared at the garish magazines exhibited, especially those which apparently appealed most to people with damp palms. After a while I snorted. "Rubbish. Absolutely rubbish."

The newsstand attendant, an elderly man in a frayed overcoat girdled with a change maker, sighed. "Look, mister, if you want a copy just stick it under your coat and give me the money. I won't tell nobody."

"Sir," I said stiffly, "I would not be caught dead with any one of these miserable rags. They should be banned from sale."

He favored the sky with a weary appeal. "Why don't you just go to the library and borrow yourself a solid book? Like medical. I'm just a poor man engaged in private enterprise."

I pointed my walking stick at the base of the stand. "One bomb placed right there could blow your messy literature sky-high." I took two savage puffs of my cigar and

strode away without looking back.

A block farther, as I waited for a light to change, I glanced back. A tall man in a trench coat appeared to be conferring with the attendant. They both looked my way and the attendant shrugged.

The light changed and I crossed the street. I entered a large dime store and purchased a cheap alarm clock. Downstairs, in the hardware department, I bought two dry cells and five feet of No. 20 telephone wire. Returning down the aisle on my way back to the stairs, I passed the man in the trench coat. He seemed to be supremely absorbed in a display of cafe curtains.

Out on the street, I lit a fresh cigar. The weather was rather damp, but it was the type of day I prefer. It stimulates the blood.

I walked smartly for several blocks when it began to drizzle. At the Metropolitan Museum of Arts, I hesitated. I glanced at the facade. Horrible taste, I thought. How much dynamite would it require to destroy a monstrosity such as that?

I tossed away my cigar and ascended the flight of stairs to the entrance. Inside, I wandered about and eventually reached a small gallery at the rear of the building.

For one of conservative tastes, the exhibit was truly one to raise the hackles—an indiscriminate mix-

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ture of Utrillos, Picassos, and Modiglianis. I scowled and sharply rapped my walking stick on the brass rail. "Tripe. Complete tripe."

One of the uniformed guards appeared at my elbow. "Don't do that, mister. You're denting the brass rail."

I indicated one of the paintings. "This appears to me to be nothing more than a badly wounded piece of canvas."

He seemed to agree. "You can't blame them boys too much, though. The invention of the camera must of hit them pretty hard. Like automation and you got to learn a new trade."

"They should be burned," I said firmly. "Every last one of them. Or better yet, blown to bits. To shreds."

"Mister," the guard said, "if you got to point, do it with your finger. Not the cane. I got to account for any holes in them pictures."

I spent the next fifteen minutes amid the mental security of the Dutch masters.

When I returned to the street, it had stopped raining. At the first corner I noticed the man in the trench coat descending the steps of the museum. Apparently he had been in the building while I had been there.

I rubbed my beard.

Now I entered a succession of

stores, departing immediately via side and rear entrances. Eventually I established beyond doubt that I was no longer followed.

In the neighborhood of my hotel, I purchased a quarter pound of butter, a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, some cold cuts, and a five pound bag of sugar.

As I entered the Medford, I noticed the man in the trench coat in a lobby chair reading a newspaper.



In my room, I constructed a sandwich and re-read last night's newspaper, principally the article dealing with the Veterans' Memorial Center. It was to be an ambitious project encompassing several acres and consisting of a number of buildings. The anticipated site had been a stretch of semi-tenements near the lake front. As a matter of fact it had been so well anticipated that there had been brisk selling

and buying by a number of individuals and the value of the properties had suddenly sky-rocketed.

Yesterday, however, the city council, mostly as the result of pressure from Mayor Pettibone, had decided to switch the site to a more northerly—and cheaper—location. Needless to say, a number of holders of the originally planned site had lost their shirts.

My phone rang and Geoffrey Mipple was on the line.

Geoffrey and I were roommates at college and have since preserved our fast friendship. On any number of subjects we are of a like mind.

"James?"

"Yes," I said.

"Did you go to the mayor's office?"

"Yes."

"What happened?"

"Just about what I anticipated."

"Are you going back again this afternoon?"

"I believe so." I took a bite of my sandwich. "You're not calling from your room, are you?"

"No. A telephone booth."

"Good." I hung up, finished my glass of milk, and then went to the closet. I removed an empty cubic box from the top shelf and went to work.

At two that afternoon, I reached for the phone and got the desk clerk. "Could you tell me how long

the city hall is open today?" I asked.

"Is this Mr. Bellington?"

"Yes."

There was an appreciable pause. Perhaps he was conferring with someone. He returned to the phone. "The city hall is open twenty-four hours a day. However almost all of the offices close at five. Is there anyone in particular you wanted to see?"

"Yes. There is." I looked at my watch. "Would you please have a taxi waiting for me in approximately twenty minutes?"

I smoked two inches of my cigar and then put on my coat. I carried my cubic box when I left the room.

The desk clerk's eyes seemed both curious and wary as he glanced at my package. "Your taxi is waiting, sir."

A single taxi stood at the curb. I entered, gave my destination, and as we pulled away, so did another taxi about a half a block behind us.

At the city hall, I noticed a peculiar vehicle parked near one of the side entrances. It was quite metallically sturdy and its rear consisted of a huge wicker-work cage.

The lobby was incredibly crowded and one had the impression of a defense alert with everyone evacuated to the main floor. At the elevators, a number of policemen seemed to be turning back anyone who wished to ascend.

"I asked.
"

I expected similar treatment, and yet a path cleared before me and I found myself in the elevator alone with the operator. At the third floor he quickly opened the door and when he descended alone I had the impression that it was at high speed.

The corridor before me was completely empty and my footfalls echoed and re-echoed. When I opened the door to the mayor's reception room, I once again found the nervous young man alone at the desk.

"I would like to see the mayor," I said. "Within the next ten minutes."

"Yes, sir," he said hastily. "Of course. Would you please take a seat over there?" He pointed to a leather upholstered davenport.

I sat down and placed the box carefully beside me.

The receptionist cleared his throat. "Would you do me a small favor, sir?"

"Perhaps."

He got up. "I have to move this bookcase from *here* over to *there*. Would you lend me a hand? Or rather, *two* hands?"

I sighed. "Very well." I left my box and grasped one end of the bookcase. "Ready?"

At that precise moment, the corridor door burst open, and Lieutenant Wymar, followed by a bevy

of policemen, stormed into the room. Two well-padded gentlemen in masks appeared in their wake.

One of the masked men spoke. "Everybody out of the room. And don't touch the box." He turned to Lieutenant Wymar. "We'll roll in our machine and X-ray the package just where it is."

Again very shortly I found myself in a room far removed from the mayor's office, with Lieutenant Wymar glowering over me. "You've got a one-track mind, haven't you?"

"One-track mind?"

"That's right. You threatened to blow up a newsstand."

I blinked. "Sir, never in my life would I . . ."

He raised a hand. "Don't bother to deny it. We had you followed when you left here yesterday. And you also threatened to blow up the Metropolitan Museum of Arts."

"Only the modern paintings," I corrected. "Have you seen that pathetic Utrillo in which he attempts . . ."

"We also know that you bought another alarm clock, some dry cells, some . . ."

The door opened and one of the padded technicians entered. "It's definitely a bomb, Lieutenant. We can make out the dry cells, the wiring, the alarm clock, and the powder charge."

I spent four hours in jail before

Lieutenant Wymar saw me again and when he did he appeared as frustrated as a lip reader at a ventriloquist's convention. With him was an intentionally informal young man wearing a crew-cut, a tweed jacket, and a smile of professional wisdom.

Lieutenant Wymar seemed to have difficulty restraining an urge to throttle me. "The powder charge wasn't a powder charge."

I smiled. "Really?"

His hands opened and closed. "It was just a bag of sugar."

I nodded. "If only you'd *asked* me."

Wymar turned abruptly to his companion. "All right, Doc. He's all yours."

When the doctor and I were alone, he offered me a cigar from a new five-pack. It was my brand and he had evidently done research.

He lit the cigar for me. "My name is Dr. Barton. Dr. Sam Barton. Just call me Sam."

"Why?"

He blew out the match. "Do you often have this compulsion to blow up things? People?"

"Doesn't everybody?"

He smiled tolerantly. "Did you lose heavily in the Veterans' Memorial operation?"

I said nothing.

"And do you blame Mayor Petti-

bone? Well, do you or don't you?"

"I believe I'm catching a cold," I said.

He smiled conspiratorily. "You were just *testing* their defenses, weren't you?"

I sneezed.

He almost patted me on the knee. "Yes. *Testing*. The first time just an alarm clock. Then the alarm clock and the mechanism, but not the powder charge. And you will keep taking boxes with you until the police get . . . how shall we say? . . . *tired*? Until they no longer bother . . . and then one day. . . ." He seemed to search for the next word.

"Pow?"

He nodded. "*Pow*." And now for half a minute he became thoughtful. "But the mechanism of the bomb would have to be different from what it is now, wouldn't it? After all, if you merely set the clock for a certain time, there would be no guarantee that you would be *with* Mayor Pettibone precisely at the time when the bomb is due to go off."

"You have an incisive mind."

He flushed slightly. "I was always rather good at logic in school. Straight A's." He leaned forward. "You would have to have something on the *outside* of the package. Something like a *doorbell pushbutton*? And when you *pressed* the

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button, the bomb would go off."

I savored my cigar. "Open circuit? Closed circuit?"

He rubbed his chin. "With an open circuit, when you pressed the pushbutton, the circuit would *close* . . . then current would begin to *flow* . . . and the the bomb. . ."

He stopped and shook his head slowly. "No. That wouldn't really do, you know."

"It wouldn't?"

"No. You see when you are carrying this package, couldn't the police put a bullet through your head?"

"That seems reasonable to me."

He nodded. "And don't you see, the sudden termination of your life might not even leave you with sufficient reflex to *push* the button."

"That *is* a problem."

"And so we come to the *closed* circuit system of wiring. In this case the current is already flowing through the circuit, but the bomb does not explode because the contact device is held magnetically immobilized by the current. However when the push button is *released*, demagnetization ensues, the contact device is released and. . ."

I supplied the word again. "Pow?"

"Precisely." He smiled at his triumph of electromagnetic reasoning. "In other words, if the police shot you through the head, it would

actually serve no constructive purpose. Your finger would merely release its pressure on the pushbutton and the bomb would go off anyway."

"By George," I said admiringly, "I believe you have it."

He frowned thoughtfully. "You haven't bought a pushbutton yet, have you?"

"No. But if I ever do, you will be the first to know."

He was pleased at the precedence. "Now remember, when you *do* buy a pushbutton, *don't* use it until you talk to me first." He took a card with his name and office address from his pocket. "In the meantime, would you care to come to see me? On Thursday at ten A.M."

"Just for a visit?"

"Of course," he said reassuringly.

"Then I am not to be kept in jail?"

"Of course not. You are free to go."

"Why?"

"Well . . . actually the police have nothing on which to hold you. Not even disorderly conduct . . . since it appears that it was actually the police who were disorderly. And since your package wasn't really . . . on closer examination . . . *rigged* as a bomb. . ."

"And there is no law against

peacefully carrying a conglomeration of objects in a package?"

He nodded. "And besides, it's the District Attorney's private suspicion that this may turn out to be some scheme whereby you get to sue the city." He studied me earnestly. "Will you?"

"I hadn't planned on it."

He seemed relieved. "Good. And besides, I prefer my own theory . . . that you were *testing*."

Twenty minutes later I found myself free on the streets. After walking a block, I once again observed that the man in the trench coat was dogging my footsteps.

It was evening now and I found it not at all difficult to lose him. When I had satisfied myself of that accomplishment, I returned to the lighted downtown section and entered a dime store.

I purchased a push button.

I did not return to my own hotel room. Instead I registered at Geoffrey's hotel and then went to his room.

Geoffrey is a thin, pipe-smoking man. "Are you going back tomorrow?"

"Yes," I said. "I've purchased the push button."

"Well . . . good luck. I hope it goes off this time."

"Thank you. It should."

I did not sleep well that night. I had a number of catastrophe

dreams, the most vivid of which being the disintegration of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in one tremendous explosion.

In the morning, I returned to Geoffrey's room and we constructed my third and final cubic package.

At ten o'clock, I phoned Dr. Barton. "Doctor, I just bought a push button."

He was disturbed. "You have? So soon? But you haven't had a session with me yet."

"I called to bid you goodbye. I do not believe that we shall meet in this world again."

"Now wait a minute," he said desperately. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to see Mayor Pettibone. This morning I shall not fail."

"Where are you now? At your hotel?"

"No." I hung up.

I sat down and read the morning's paper while I smoked a full cigar. Then I went downstairs with my cubic box and directed the first taxi driver to take me to the city hall.

However, one block before my destination, I ordered him to pull to the curb. I paid my fare and stepped out onto the sidewalk. I carried the package in front of me, one thumb firmly depressing the

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push button affixed to its top.
I surveyed the panorama before me.

The avenue ahead was innocent of all vehicles and pedestrians. The side streets had been roped off and uniformed policemen were stationed at intervals to see that none of the spectators—and there appeared to be *thousands*—trespassed into the clearing. In effect, a wide path led directly to the entrance of the city hall.

To one side I spied Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton. The latter, as a matter of fact, seemed to be hiding behind a lamp post.

With all those thousands of eyes staring at me, I suddenly experienced a new and strange sensation.

Stage fright.

I took two tentative steps toward the city hall, then I turned abruptly and walked away.

For some moments there was silence behind me and then Lieutenant Wymar shouted. "Hey, wait a minute!"

I walked faster.

When I glanced back, I saw him, Dr. Barton, and a host of police officers in pursuit.

I broke into a trot.

Hundreds of pedestrians seemed to join the procession behind me.

I dashed down the block, glanced back again, paused for a breath, and quickly darted up the stairs of

the Metropolitan Museum of Arts. The swarming mass turned in my direction and I dashed into the building.

I puffed badly as I trotted through the Dutch masters. Behind me the roar of the chase clung like adhesive. My heart thumped with the exertion as I quickly traversed an exhibition of Roman sculpture. The relentless pursuit continued.

Eventually only one corridor remained ahead of me. I staggered past two startled guards into the exhibition of modern art. At the far end of the gallery I came face to face with a blank wall. I turned and faced the far door.

The pack surged through the doorway, Lieutenant Wymar and Dr. Barton acting as point.

I held up my free hand and shouted with evident hysteria. "Stop! Everybody *stop*! One more step and I shall release this push button!"

Lieutenant Wymar and his army skidded to a halt—possibly leaving heel marks on the marble floor.

I took several breaths before I managed to speak again. "Lieutenant Wymar, I have decided to give up trying to see Mayor Pettibone. Apparently he is completely inaccessible."

That was pleasant information for the lieutenant. "Well, now you're showing some sense." He

took a quick, eager step forward. "Halt!" I shouted, my voice verily ricocheting off the walls. "One more step and I shall release this button."

Lieutenant Wymar froze.

I again raised my voice for an announcement. "In exactly ten minutes, I shall release this push button. I would do so at this exact instant, except for the simple fact that I have a desire to regain my breath before making such a momentous decision."

Dr. Barton cleared his throat uneasily. "If we could just talk to you for . . ."

"On the other hand," I said, "waiting to regain one's breath at a time like this is frivolous . . . procrastinating . . . perhaps I should. . ."

Dr. Barton spoke quickly. "No. No. By all means, regain your breath."

Lieutenant Wymar turned to an aide at his side. "Just how much damage could that box do if it went off?"

His assistant frowned thoughtfully. "It's hard to say, Lieutenant. With some of these new combinations, he might be able to blow up the whole building."

I looked at my watch. "In *nine* minutes I shall release the button."

The lieutenant made a swift decision. "Clear the building. Hop to

it." He then spoke to Dr. Barton. "You stay here and try to talk him out of it."

Dr. Barton seemed unhappy. "I really don't think I could do anything in a case like this, Lieutenant. We need somebody with a little more experience in this particular field." He looked at me hopefully. "A priest? A minister? A rabbi?"

"Eight minutes," I said.

Dr. Barton immediately joined the general retreat.

Through the doorway I saw that my pursuers had at least temporarily halted in the sculpture department. I smiled grimly and advanced. The retreat recommenced immediately.

A new and unique emotion took possession of me.

The feeling of power.

I found myself chuckling as now I pursued them through the Early American primitives, through a lane of lithographs, and pell mell down the hall of prize winning junior high school watercolors. When they reached the front door they were fairly tumbling over each other.

I laughed triumphantly and then dashed about the building rooting out any brave souls who might have chosen to remain. I discovered two—though not brave—crouching beneath their desks in the adminis-

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trative department. I sent them fleeing out the back door into the gathering crowd.

When I returned to the front windows, I saw Lieutenant Wymar, Dr. Barton, and a number of people who appeared to be officials, gathered in conference at a safe distance from the building.

I watched them for five minutes. Ten. Twelve.

And then I went to one of the front doors, opened it, and stepped out.

A strong murmur rose from the crowd—possibly at the prospect of witnessing some poor soul blowing himself to bits—but I noticed that none of the civilized spectators departed permanently. They merely retreated, attempting in the process to preserve their line of sight.

I gazed at the assemblage for fully one minute.

And then I removed my thumb from the push button.

Nothing—of course—happened.

I quickly removed the wrapping from my box and extracted the alarm clock and the wire. I held them up for all to see. Then I upended the box, signifying that it was now indeed empty.

I put the entire mess into a convenient trash box nearby. I did not want to be arrested for litter-bugging.

I was immediately—*immediately*

—surrounded by a large number of angry men—of whom Lieutenant Wymar seemed typical. His face was definitely mottled and he communicated in something of a strangled manner. "Just what kind of a practical joke is this?"

I glared. "It is no practical joke. I merely wanted to see Mayor Pettibone, but apparently that is a capital crime in this city."

"Now wait a minute!" he roared. "So maybe there wasn't any bomb in the box, but. . . ."

"Of *course* there was no bomb in the box," I snapped. "There never has been and there never will be."

"But the clock . . . the wires . . . the push button. . . ."

"Is there a *law* against wires? Push buttons? Experimenting with timing devices happens to be my hobby." I wagged a finger under his nose. "The Civil Liberties Union shall hear about this. I shall sue. For a million dollars."

"Mister," Wymar announced wearily, "*you're* going to jail."

I showed my teeth. "Really? On what charge? It is I who have been hounded, abused. It is *I* who have been pursued by what clearly appeared to me to be a lynch mob *led* by officers of the law. I shall sue for *two* million dollars."

A small worried man appeared at Lieutenant Wymar's elbow.

"Now just one moment, Lieutenant. Let's not get rash. We're having enough trouble with the budget as it is."

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He spoke almost apologetically. "Mayor Pettibone."

"Ah, ha!" I said. "So finally you have come out of hiding. I've been trying to inform you that directly below my hotel window there is a series of holes in the street. When trucks rattle over them at night I find it *impossible* to sleep. I demand that the city do something about them immediately!"

I struck my walking stick sharply on the pavement, turned indignantly, and stalked away.

I rather expected to feel an authoritative hand on my shoulder, but apparently my abrupt departure had left them mired in indecision. A precipitous retreat often leaves the enemy in confusion.

I forced my way quickly through the crowd and within one hundred and fifty yards found a taxi. I entered it and directed the driver to a west side address.

However, after half a mile, I ordered him to stop before a supermarket. "I'll be out immediately," I said. "I have to make a small purchase."

I entered the supermarket and exited immediately by a rear door. In the alley, I tossed away my walk-

ing stick and hat. I pulled off my false beard, reversed my topcoat, making my attire brown rather than blue, and donned a cloth cap.

I walked down the alley and more than a block before I found another taxi. I settled in the back seat. "The airport, please."

I met Geoffrey the next day in St. Louis.

He showed me the three Utrillos, the two Picassos, and the two Modiglianis. "Everything worked perfectly. I hid in the lavatory. After you cleared out the building I slipped into the gallery and shoved the pictures under my coat. When I ran out of the back of the building nobody paid much attention to me. They thought I was just someone you were chasing."

He poured us two drinks. "Suppose they had arrested you?"

I shrugged. "They could have suspected anything they wanted to, but they could have proved nothing. My lawyer would merely have to point out that while everyone hounded me, some dastardly thief took advantage of the situation to steal some paintings."

He handed me my glass. "Do you think we can pull this off again?"

I smiled. "No. However, I am sure I shall think of something else next time."

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